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ABSTRACT

This article presents a realistic response to the limits of accountability in higher education. Emphasis is placed on management information systems, limits to accountability, the relationship of accountability and subtler aspects of academic need, the measurable and nonmeasurable items of budgeting, and the ultimate goal of education. (MJM)

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Facing the Accountability Crunch

Education, particularly higher education, is on the defensive in Washington, the 50 state capitals, and elsewhere. One result is a new demand for efficiency and accountability on the part of the colleges and universities, a demand that was the subject of thoughtful analysis by Stephen K. Bailey, who recently resigned as a member of the New York State Board of Regents to become vice president of the American Council on Education. Mr. Bailey offered his thoughts in a speech entitled "The Limits of Accountability," delivered last February before a conference of New York college and university trustees. The following article is adapted from his remarks and from a subsequent article in *Change* Magazine.

We (educators) have a hard time explaining and justifying our needs to others because we have all but lost the capacity to explain our central mission to ourselves. Some of you may have noted in the Sunday *New York Times Book Review* (February 3, 1973) a reference to Lionel Trilling's allusion in his 1972 Jefferson Lecture to "'the growing intellectual recessiveness of college and university faculties,' their inability to defend themselves against government edicts, or to produce an articulate theory of Higher Education." It is difficult to be called, as you and I are, "defenders of the faith" at a time when faith in education is in disarray – and when the very concept of "faith" itself resonates with the nostalgic notes of a very distant Angelus.

Perhaps our wisdom begins in reviewing why higher education is on the defensive. If you will forgive the praetorotea, I shall not remind you the many reasons: the rapidly escalating costs of education; the campus unrest of the late '60s; the growing governmental skepticism about the social utility of academic research; the collision of generational values on academic turf – a collision that forces academic staff to side either with the parents who feed them or with the young people who need them; a widespread conviction that "the college bred have had a four-year loaf" – as the old saw has it; the alleged slackening of academic standards under the pressure of numbers and open enrollment; the decibels of noise from campus orators aimed at the very politicians whose votes are needed if next year's academic budget is to be met; the dissatisfaction of many students and parents with the education being purveyed; an insidious corrosion of our very faith in reason itself – perhaps as an understandable backlash to the hubris of too many academic scientists and the preciousness of too many humanistic scholars. Finally, the war on one hand and high rates of youth unemployment on the other have overlaid much of higher education of the past decade with a blanket of cynicism and futility. Perhaps everything else we have mentioned is a sullen derivative of these secular tragedies.

Whatever the present shortcomings of our colleges and universities – and there are many – the increasingly recurrent response to setting things right is "accountability." Or "productivity," "efficiency," "fiscal responsibility," "better management systems," "cost effectiveness," or simply a "businesslike" approach.

MANAGEMENT A LA GENERAL MOTORS

We have heard it before: if we could just run our universities as General Motors is managed, most of our educational problems would vanish. The management scientists are having a field day and perhaps higher education deserves what is coming its way. There has been, and there remains, a lot of fat in academic management. I have little patience with faculty and students who demand 9:00, 10:00, or 11:00 a.m. classes only, Monday through Friday, leaving a vast amount of expensive academic plant unused during half the workweek. All of us get upset, or should get upset, by institutional egoisms that preclude regional efficiencies in library acquisitions and computer sharing. College investment policies have tended to gyrate between portfolios of penury and wild orgies at the racetrack. Faculties have resisted the introduction of educational technology, various forms of nontraditional studies, and outside calls for a more precise definition of academic

goals. And this resistance has understandably worn thin the patience of those called upon to finance higher education – seemingly at ever higher rates. Too many presidents and chancellors balance their budgets on the corpse of deferred maintenance.

I believe that there are limits to accountability in education but many colleges and universities have not reached those limits, and both public and private supporters of higher education have the right and the obligation to press for tidier management, for a more effective utilization of human and physical resources, for a more imaginative exploration of alternative paths to individual academic achievement outside as well as inside college classrooms. Surely we do need better financial management if we are to deserve more financial resources from public and private donors. My guess is that this will come close to being the dominant theme of the 1970s.

Quiet huzzahs will fill the air of trustee meetings as the ratios of full-time equivalents to units of usable floor space improve by the smallest of incremental fractions. Smiles of stoic satisfaction will presumably greet the announcement that, because of small enrollments, Greek mythology and the senior seminars on Milton and on Chinese music have been dropped from the catalog. Each faculty member will be forced to state his or her course objectives clearly and develop measures of productivity to determine whether learning objectives are being met, and how well. All of this information – computerized, naturally – will become part of the management information system aimed at improving cost-benefit.

LIMITS TO ACCOUNTABILITY

By at least 1984, if we work hard we can make education supremely efficient and accountable. Efficiency is what we render unto Caesar, and we hardly need reminding that Caesar has his legions. But the very awesomeness of the powers and principalities of the cult of efficiency compels me to argue with some fervor that there are limits to accountability, limits to efficiency, limits to slide-rule definitions of educational productivity. Surely the ultimate philistinism of our culture would be totally to impose management science upon the educational process.

Though I am not opposed to faculty unionism, unless carefully guarded it could well exacerbate the secular drift toward education's domination by efficiency cultists. Faculty, like the rest of us, are not incapable of selling their souls for a mess of pottage. Trade-offs of higher salaries for the faculties' submission to the calipers of CPAs and systems analysts may well be the contractual paradigm of the next decade.

If so, we may well lose what we are trying to save. Perhaps we have lost it already. Perhaps the halls of academe killed it from within by the aridity, sterility, and arcane quality of much of our research. Perhaps we lost it in our struggle for parking-lot status, or through our incapacity to distinguish between student anguish and student bullying. Perhaps we lost our essence in the contradictions we allowed to develop between our claims to academic freedom and the intemperate and irresponsible politicking we indulged in under the protection of its cloak.

THE QUESTION OF ESSENCE

What is that essence? It may defy description but what we cannot define, perhaps we can illustrate.

For example, the discipline of mathematics has many useful instruments. A working knowledge of those instruments in pure and applied form is amenable to test and measurement, and hence to some cost-benefit model of pedagogic effect. But how can one measure that ineffable moment, known to every math professor worth his salt, when a student's eyes wander unfocused and luminous past the teacher and the blackboard in the sudden discovery of the symmetry, the wonder, and the principled beauty of the universe?

A working knowledge of vocabulary can be tested. We can measure how many words a student can define in September and how many more he knows in June. Fairly precise "program objectives" can be set for syntax and for spelling. But how does one measure the mounting excitement of a student who, in catching the cadence of a line from Yeats, suddenly knows Innisfreedom?

For reasons of cost effectiveness, we can, of course, lop off a course in Greek mythology because of low enrollments. But it is just possible that, if one or two statesmen had read about Promethean hubris prior to our excursions in Vietnam, the world might have been spared ten or twenty years of the anger of the gods.

We can stop faculty junketing to academic conferences by holding down travel budgets or multiplying travel forms, but the search for truth can suffer if the faculty is not exposed to both catalysts and critics.

And what of the dividends of faculty-student friendships? Remember the lovely confession of E.B. White? "When I was an undergraduate," he once wrote, "there were a few professors who went out of their way to befriend students. At the house of one of these men I felt more at home than I did in my own home with my own father and mother. I felt excited, instructed, accepted, influential, and in a healthy condition."

Surely if we have a responsibility to insist that what we

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render unto Caesar we render efficiently, we have an equal if not superior responsibility to ensure that what we render unto God we render effectively. This may mean that, in some circumstances, narrow canons of efficiency are the enemy of effectiveness. Academia needs some spiritual, physical, intellectual, and temporal space, uncluttered by the artifacts of management logicians and quantitative doodlers. If we would be true defenders of the faith, we must be willing to promote efficiency while protecting effectiveness. And we must learn when these concepts are compatible and when they are not.

How, in fact, can the current and foreseeable demand for accountability be meshed with the subtler aspects of academic need? Alas, there are no gimmicks. In protecting the life spaces of the learning process, trustees and chancellors and deans and department heads can demonstrate, by the questions they ask and the trade-offs they reject, their devotion to true academic effectiveness. Sometimes this will take the form of protecting an "uneconomic" small course; sometimes it will manifest itself in protesting at a budget hearing or before a legislative committee against abolishing out-of-state travel allowances for faculty; occasionally it will appear as a defense of an assistant professor who is a mediocre lecturer but a superb student advisor; frequently it will express itself as defense of faculty and student time for reading and reflection on important matters.

When cost accountants or budget specialists ask for the economic justification of such "frills," they should be reminded of the late Glenn Frank's response to a rural member of the Wisconsin legislature when he showed signs of shock in hearing that University of Wisconsin faculty taught only nine hours a week. President Frank responded: "Sir, you are famous for your stud bulls. Would you judge their value by the number of hours a week they work?"

THE MEASURABLE AND THE NON-MEASURABLE

Part of the job of trustees is to make their friends in the legislative and executive branches of the national and state governments understand that it is essential to support those aspects of education not amenable to tight schedules of efficiency. Perhaps academic budgets can be divided into "measurable items" and "nonmeasurable items." In regard to the former, responsible officials should insist that accountability be rigorous, quantified, and detailed. In regard to the latter, officials should be asked to recall the moments in their own education that in retrospect meant most to them. I have confidence that public servants will respond to this approach. During the campuses' dark days of the late 1960s, a few politicians in the legislative and executive branches of our state and federal governments preserved education from the imposition of barbarous external constraints upon academic processes. I wonder if we ever took the time to thank them?

For most of mankind, life is a dirty trick. For others, it is lived, in Thoreau's term, in quiet desperation. The promise of education is that, through knowledge of nature and knowledge of self, people can fashion a temporary habitat on this whirling planet that can cater with some felicity to the impertinent claims of their restless souls. We get seduced into narrow definitions of education's function: the development of job skills, which we need; the mastery of specific disciplines, which is important; the capacity to communicate, which is indispensable; the uncovering of new knowledge and the refining of old knowledge, which is essential. These are, for the most part, measurable goals of education.

But I submit that the prime function of education is not measurable. The ultimate business of education is human freedom. And if human freedom means nothing but the sad and sorry flow of existence upon a well-documented darkling plain, the charge to university graduates should be to push the button when they have the chance. If the human race has, in fact, been caught up in an irreversible ebb tide, if Matthew Arnold's transient mood at Dover Beach has become an eternal reality, then it is irrelevant whether the missiles fall. For the option is an endless melancholy, a sullen ennui — deaf to the song of the thrush, blind to the evening sky, and indifferent to the creative wonders of man's mind and hand.

THE SUPREME OBLIGATION

Education today must affirm the promise of human life. It must help us see citizens and public officials not as instruments of survival or of mere security, but as possible instruments of human freedom — to see the good society as an arrangement of institutions and laws that help to free men from the bondage of fear, loneliness, and injustice, and from the crushing impersonalities of life. It must promote all that is ennobling and creative in the human psyche. It must help us posit a society whose ultimate dividends are joy and variety and vitality within the bounds of community, a society in which humanistic critics postulate man not just as he has been or as he is, but as he can be.

The great philosopher-President of prewar Czechoslovakia, Thomas Masaryk, once defined our supreme task for us. After decades of struggle in the harsh arena of public life, Masaryk summed up his philosophy: "You see how it is: the method must be absolutely practical, reasonable, realistic, but the aim, the whole, the conception is an eternal poem."

Our supreme function is not to improve managerial efficiency in education. We cannot countenance obvious waste and we have obligations to the public to see that money is not used frivolously. But our supreme obligation is to remind ourselves and our public and private benefactors that a partially unquantifiable and inherently untidy system of higher education must routinely make legitimate demands upon the treasuries

of the purse in order to nourish the treasuries of the mind and spirit. For freedom is the condition of nobility and knowledge is the condition of freedom.

Stephen K. Bailey